

# Committee on Resources

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## Witness Testimony

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Testimony on  
Oversight Hearing on  
Management of the Stanislaus National Forest  
RONALD E. STEWART  
Deputy Chief Programs and Legislation  
Forest Service  
US Department of Agriculture  
Before the  
House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
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### MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss an array of National Forest management issues affecting Tuolumne County and the Central Sierra. I am Ronald Stewart, Deputy Chief for Programs and Legislation from Washington, DC. I am accompanied today by Jim Lawrence, Deputy Regional Forester of the Pacific Southwest Region in San Francisco; Phil Aune, Program Manager with the Pacific Southwest Research Station, and the Forest Service Program Manager of the Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project; Janice Gauthier, Past Team Leader for the California Spotted Owl Interdisciplinary Team; Glenn Gottschall, Acting Forest Supervisor for the Stanislaus National Forest in Sonora; and, Rob Finch, Stanislaus Resources Program Leader.

I will start with the broad scale issues and finish with those specific to Representative Doolittle's District. The issues we are here to discuss are: management of California Spotted Owl habitat in the Sierra Nevada National Forests of California (Calowl) and its relationship to the Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project (SNEP) assessment; administrative reorganization of the Stanislaus National Forest; and an overview of the proposed Granite Watershed enhancement project.

### CHANGES IN NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT

Recent changes in the management of California forests, including the Stanislaus, have been driven, at least in part, by the requirements of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 to provide for diversity of plant and animal communities by ensuring the viability of native and desired non-native species of fish and wildlife within the context of overall multiple-use. The Forest Service has historically managed habitat for the native California spotted owl, a close relative of the northern spotted owl, using a network of Spotted Owl Habitat Areas (SOHAS) similar to those used to manage the northern spotted owl. In 1990, a scientific analysis team released its peer reviewed conservation strategy for the northern spotted owl indicating that the historical management approach could not ensure viability of the species.

### CASPO

As a result of the Thomas report on the northern spotted owl, an interagency technical team was formed to

review the status, habitat requirements, and population trends of the California spotted owl. The team's July, 1992 findings are documented in what is known as the CASPO Report. They concluded that there is no scientific evidence to suggest that owls have declined in their overall distribution in the Sierra Nevada or that they have declined markedly within any forest type there. They did find that the California spotted owl uses a wider range of habitat conditions than the northern spotted owl. The team's two greatest concerns were "the rapid disappearance of the large, old, and generally decadent trees that are the focus of nesting by spotted owls," and the increasing risk of high-severity fires to owl habitat.

The technical team recommended a series of short-term measures to maintain the current distribution of spotted owls including the retention of varying amounts of large trees and snags in suitable owl habitat and the thinning of overstocked stands to reduce the risk of high-severity fires. These recommendations were adopted by the Forest Service as an interim Regional Guide and through Forest Plan Amendments on the 10 affected national forests in January 1993.

The CASPO Report of 1992 provided a foundation for developing an ecologically sound strategy for maintaining the viability of the California spotted owl.

## CALOWL

In April 1993, an interdisciplinary planning team was formed to develop the long-term strategy that would replace the interim guidelines approved in January of that year. The analysis covered 10 National Forests and over 10 million acres of National Forest System lands. The Draft EIS prepared by the team analyzed a number of alternative strategies and was released for public comment in February 1995. CalOwl was designed to:

- Analyze the habitat requirements of the wildlife community as whole, including the spotted owl, using an ecosystem approach;
- Emphasize restoration of forest health and reduction of the risks of high-severity fire; and
- Strengthen riparian management direction to maintain and restore the productivity of wildlife and aquatic habitat.

The draft EIS analyzed a number of alternatives ranging from a network of large reserves with virtually no logging to an active management proposal with extensive use of timber harvests and prescribed fire. The preferred alternative differed from both current forest land and resource management plans and the CASPO interim guidelines. It was intended to maintain and restore key ecosystem elements that would provide habitat to support viable populations of the owl and other species. It placed both commodity production and spotted owl management in a broader Sierra Nevada ecosystem context and provided for fuels management to reduce the risk of high-severity fires.

The public review and comment period for the DEIS closed July 10, 1995. The team made modifications to the EIS based on comments and, in August, 1996, prepared a revised draft Environmental Impact Statement (RDEIS) for management's review in anticipation of a public comment period and subsequent final EIS and Record of Decision.

## SNEP

The Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project assessment was directed by Congress in the Conference Report of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 1993 (P.L. 102-381). The law called for

the "... scientific review of the remaining old-growth in the national forests of the Sierra Nevada in California, and for a study of the entire Sierra Nevada ecosystem by an independent panel of scientists, with expertise in diverse areas related to this issue."

The SNEP assessment area encompassed 25.6 million acres, over twice the area that CalOwl covers, and was carried out by a group of independent scientists. The goals established by Congress for this study included providing a social overview of the Sierra Nevada area; determining old growth and late successional forest conditions including a special examination of Giant Sequoia groves; evaluating the health conditions and sustainability of the ecosystems within the Sierra Nevada; providing an evaluation of ecological processes; determining economic conditions of the current market and non-market economic indicators of historic, current and future management options for the area; and providing an assessment of the watersheds, including the condition of the aquatic ecosystems.

The SNEP assessment was delivered to Congress in June, 1996, and made public in July, 1996.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CALOWL AND SNEP

The two planning documents, SNEP and the RDEIS for CalOwl, were thus completed within a two month period. SNEP, as an assessment, is an informational document. The SNEP findings were overall very similar to the analysis in the RDEIS. They both call for an emphasis on fuels reduction in the most flammable forest types; increased protection and restoration of aquatic and riparian systems; the importance of diverse wildlife habitats with emphasis on large tree dominated, closed canopy forests; and maintenance and protection of sustainable late seral conditions.

However, as the two documents were being reviewed it was determined that there were possible inconsistencies between them that could affect the integrity of the Calowl analysis. It was decided to have an independent team review the documents and assure their consistency.

On May 23, 1997, Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman named 9 members and a committee chair to provide a scientific analysis of the California spotted owl management proposals. This committee of natural resource specialists was chartered under the authority of the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972. The charter of the Committee was to evaluate how the proposed RDEIS, developed by the Forest Service, integrates the information from the Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project chartered by Congress, and the California Spotted owl Technical Report developed in 1992.

This committee, composed of scientists and scholars, is chaired by Charles W. Philpot, the former director of the Pacific Northwest Research Station of the USDA's Forest Service with Norman Christensen, dean of the Duke University School of Forestry serving as the vice chair. The committee has met three times, in a public forum, including a working session in Visalia, California that will finish up today. Previous publicly held meetings this summer have included presentations by invited experts and interest groups as well as interactive discussions about the document comparisons. Committee recommendations to the Secretary are expected this fall.

## REORGANIZATION OF THE STANISLAUS NATIONAL FOREST

The land ethic most often cited by our new Chief, Mike Dombeck, is best characterized by Aldo Leopold, who said, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community." This ethic accepts short-term constraints on human treatment of land so as to ensure long-term

health and sustainability of the biotic community. The strategy that characterizes this ethic is ecosystem management and we are using it as a holistic approach to natural resource management. Ecosystem management integrates the human, biological, and physical dimensions of natural resource management in order to achieve sustainability of all resources. Its concepts are the foundation for the SNEP report directed by Congress and the CalOwl EIS.

Much of the Forest Service organizational structure evolved in response to our traditional multiple-use appropriated programs: timber, wildlife, recreation, and livestock grazing. Through the National Performance Review (NPR), the Clinton Administration is working to redirect government energy away from a preoccupation with artificial administrative boundaries towards a focus on natural ecosystems.

The Stanislaus has entered into an era of organizational study and change because of the NPR Reinvention, changes in public expectations, and budget projections. Potential impacts to budgets are increased as the Administration and Congress work to meet the intent of the Balanced Budget Act and its subsequent laws and agreements.

Skill needs within the agency, as a whole, and on the Stanislaus are changing. Reinvention demands that the Forest Service eliminate inefficiency, flatten supervisory layers, and focus on the critical work to serve our customers. This is also reflected on the Stanislaus National Forest. The Stanislaus has been engaged in reorganizational study and proposal development for the past three years. A new line and staff organization was implemented this past Spring as part of their conceptual reorganization proposal. In addition, several "forest substructure teams" were formed to validate existing organizational structure and look at proposed organizational alignment. They developed a proposed substructure that is being addressed in a "Staffing Plan" that will outline procedures for position management. A Civil Rights Impact Analysis is also being completed which will address the impacts of employee recommendations and management decisions.

So what does this mean to the Forest Service employees located on the Stanislaus National Forest? At this time there is no expectation that the staffing plan will require the surplus of employees. The Stanislaus has been, and will continue, moving into the new organization continuously taking advantage of transfers, retirements, reassignments, and retraining. The Supervisor's office and all of the Districts have adjusted staffing without any office closures or disruption in public services. Future land management will be based on a watershed focus rather than a structure identified through artificial administrative boundaries. However, if the 1998 budget is static or reduced, the Forest, like many others, may face further downsizing.

If budgets are not adequate and it becomes necessary to reduce the size of the work force, an analysis will be conducted to determine what positions must be eliminated. A determination will then be made as to which employees are affected. This is done through a negotiated procedure that essentially identifies the employee in that line of work in the commuting area who has the least service. Affected employees are registered in a Work Force Reduction and Placement System for priority consideration for funded positions elsewhere. As a last resort when priority placement is not effective because of a lack of vacancies or employee mobility, reduction in force authority may be requested. If approved by the Chief and the Secretary, a reduction in force would rank employees in the commuting area on a number of factors spelled out in OPH regulations, and the lowest-standing employees would be separated. The Forest Service has authority to offer early retirement and is considering the use of buyouts, and these programs may also offer a solution, depending on employees' interest. If RIF authority is exercised on the Stanislaus, depending on how many miles are considered for the commuting area, positions on Summit and Mi-Wok, or Mi-Wok and the Supervisor's office may be considered together for the purposes of identifying surplus employees.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PROPOSED GRANITE WATERSHED ENHANCEMENT PROJECT.

I know that Congressman Doolittle has been working closely with the Stanislaus National Forest, local governments and the community on a stewardship project for the Granite watershed. The proposal, known as the Granite Watershed Enhancement Project, is a demonstration project which includes watershed protection and restoration projects within and adjacent to the Granite Burn on the Stanislaus National Forest. The Granite Burn occurred in August 1973 and consumed 17,000 acres within the Tuolumne River watershed near Yosemite National Park. Congressman Doolittle's support for this effort and for the responsible management of our national forests is greatly appreciated.

The project is a keystone to the fire hazard reduction and watershed improvement components of the CALFED Bay-Delta program strategy. CALFED is a partnership between Federal, state, and local governments as well as concerned private individuals and companies, designed to improve the Bay and related delta areas. The Tuolumne watershed supplies drinking water to the City and County of San Francisco, portions of Tuolumne County, and other communities in the greater Bay Area. The Granite watershed is also a significant recreation use area, providing recreational opportunities as a gateway to Yosemite.

The project is a collaborative effort between the Stanislaus National Forest, Tuolumne County, other federal and state agencies, private enterprises, and other groups. The project area has a backlog of restoration projects such as timber stand thinning, riparian and meadow revegetation, road maintenance, and road obliteration and is at high risk from wildfires. This project will provide immediate watershed protection benefits and will be integrated into the Tuolumne River watershed analysis scheduled to begin in 1998.

The primary biological/ecological objectives of the project are to:

- Conduct restoration to protect the project area from the immediate threat of large and damaging wildfire, to restore hydrologic function to meadows and riparian areas, and to reduce stream sedimentation
- Serve as a model in coordinating restoration efforts.

The Forest Service plans to design, coordinate and implement the project over a 3-5 year period beginning next fiscal year if funding is available. This will include:

- Reducing fuels available for wildfire by completing 6,500 acres of ponderosa pine and 1,000 acres of mixed conifer thinning.
- Reducing stream sedimentation by closing unneeded roads and performing maintenance elsewhere.
- Enhancing shading and increasing plant diversity in riparian areas by brush removal and reestablishment of riparian species.
- Restoring hydrologic function in meadows to increase water holding capacity and reduce sedimentation.

Project costs over five years are estimated to be \$5,000,000. Implementation and effectiveness monitoring would be conducted on all aspects of this project, including water quality, quantity and timing. We are excited about the opportunity to implement this project with our partners under joint powers agreements and memorandums of understanding. We expect to accomplish this project to the extent that funds are available.

## CLOSING

I have addressed a broad array of issues and would like to try to summarize them briefly. The planning efforts in the Sierra are complex and interrelated. The scientific review underway is designed to assure consistency between CalOwl, SNEP, and earlier studies. It is the Administration's hope that this review will provide the information needed for the Forest Service to complete the analysis and issue a Record of Decision.

Each Forest Supervisor managing a National Forest is facing more and more complex decisions and decision-making processes. I believe that the Stanislaus' efforts to look at ways to more efficiently deliver services to the public are both necessary and prudent. I have been assured by Glenn that he will involve the public in any reorganization efforts that will result in a change in the location of offices or workcenterb. I encourage the public to interact with Glenn and his staff to identify the services communities need if further changes are required.

Collaborative partnerships are the tools of the future for management of the national forests. The Granite project has the potential to be an excellent model for restoration partnerships. I believe that the authorities to enter into these ventures already exist administratively and that the project can be effectively delivered beginning In 1998. We look forward to this partnership and improving the quality of ecosystem health in the Tuolumne watershed.

This concludes my formal statement. We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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